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Sandinistas to ignore rebels' hold on town

From combined dispatches

MANAGUA — Nicaragua's defense minister said yesterday the Sandinistas will not take immediate action to recapture San Juan del Norte, the first town to be seized and held by rebels fighting the leftist regime for the past two years.

The Caribbean seaport near the Costa Rican border was captured over the weekend by the Revolutionary Democratic Alliance (ARDE) of Eden Pastora after three days of heavy fighting.

In El Salvador, meanwhile, members of the Central Elections Council threatened to resign unless President Alvaro Magana vetoed a conservative-backed move to eliminate voter-registration lists in May 6 runoff elections for president.

The elections council argues the U.S.-funded registration lists are an important safeguard to prevent double voting in a presidential runoff on May 6.

Mr. Magana declined to say whether he would sign the bill.

Sandinista junta leader Daniel Ortega said Saturday night that San Juan, 230 miles southeast of the

capital, had little strategic importance.

Defense Minister Humberto Ortega, returning from a visit to the

Soviet Union and North Korea yesterday, said the army did not immediately plan to retake the seaport.

In the past, Nicaraguan forces have moved aggressively to retake towns occupied by the guerrillas. The only significant previous guerrilla occupation of a town was when forces in northern Nicaragua occupied Ocotol. The guerrillas held that town only for several hours.

Costa Rican journalists just back from San Juan yesterday said the rebels were also holding a 30-mile beachhead along the southern coast.

They said Mr. Pastora told them in San Juan Saturday that a 450-man rebel force seized the port after three days of fierce fighting against 250 government troops.

The newsmen quoted Mr. Pastora as saying the beachhead would enable the rebels to bring in arms by the Caribbean Sea "to continue offensives towards the north and the west."

The coastal town of about 6,000 population is located about one mile from the Costa Rica-Nicaragua border, 190 miles southeast of the Nicaraguan capital of Managua.

ARDE reported inflicting 100 casualties on the government defenders. A number of government soldiers also were reported to have been captured, with four wounded being flown to a hospital in Costa Rica.

ARDE said it suffered three killed and 15 wounded in the assault.

According to ARDE spokesman Orion Pastora, Eden Pastora's brother, the rebels have placed artillery around the town to protect it from counterattacks.

Diplomatic sources in the Costa Rican capital of San Jose, according to reports, confirmed that rebel artillery has been set up in the area.

ARDE operates in an area along the Nicaraguan-Costa Rican border and has controlled access to the San Juan River river for more than a year.

Heavy fighting also has been reported in several of Nicaragua's northern departments, where rebels of the Nicaraguan Democratic Forces, or FDN, operate from bases inside Honduras.

In Washington, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Jeane Kirkpatrick and former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger yesterday defended the mining of Nicaraguan harbors, reportedly directed by the CIA.

"It is legal because Nicaragua is engaged in a process of armed aggression against her neighbors," Mrs. Kirkpatrick said on ABC Television's "This Week With David Brinkley."

Mr. Kissinger, who recently chaired a bipartisan commission on Central American policy, said on the same program he is "sympathetic" to the mining and it is justified by the need to stop communism in Central America.